

## **Primary language teacher education in Italy: refining syllabus design by listening to learners' voices**

La definición del sílabo de un curso se basa generalmente en consideraciones vinculadas al nivel final de competencia lingüística que se desea alcanzar. Para medir este nivel de competencia lingüística se puede recurrir a diferentes instrumentos, uno de los cuales es el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia. Dicho documento contiene sin embargo una serie de indicaciones que necesitan, sobre todo en el caso de la enseñanza primaria, de una mayor definición.

El presente trabajo ilustra cómo las opiniones de profesores de educación primaria que frecuentaron un curso para enseñar la lengua inglesa en la escuela elemental pueden utilizarse para identificar de la forma más precisa posible los contenidos de nuevos cursos de formación para los profesores de lengua inglesa de la escuela elemental.

### **Palabras clave:**

Definición del sílabo

Enseñanza de la lengua inglesa

Escuela elemental

Cursos de formación

Decisions concerning syllabus design are generally based on considerations linked with the level of competence to be attained by the end of the course. The Common European Framework of Reference is one of the many yardsticks against which language competence can be measured. However, the guidelines it provides may need further qualifications, especially when dealing with foreign-language primary school teaching.

This paper sets out to examine how the opinions of a group of primary school teachers who have been trained to become English teachers can be exploited for the purpose of refining the design of the syllabus of further training courses.

### **Key words**

Syllabus design

English language teaching

Primary school

Training courses

En général, la définition du plan du cours se fonde sur des considérations liées au niveau final de compétence linguistique que l'on se propose d'atteindre. Afin de mesurer ce niveau de compétence linguistique, il est possible d'avoir recours à de nombreux outils, en particulier au Cadre Européen Commun de Référence. Toutefois, ce document contient des indications qui nécessitent d'une définition plus approfondie, notamment dans le cas de l'enseignement primaire.

Cette recherche se propose d'illustrer comment les opinions de professeurs élémentaires qui ont fréquenté un cours pour enseigner la langue anglaise dans l'école élémentaire peuvent être exploitées afin d'établir, de manière ponctuelle, les contenus de nouveaux cours de formation pour les enseignants de langue anglaise de l'école élémentaire.

### **Mots-clés**

Définition du plan du cours

Enseignement de la langue anglaise  
Ecole élémentaire  
Cours de formation

## **Primary language teacher education in Italy: refining syllabus design by listening to learners' voices**

### **1. Introduction**

The last ten years<sup>1</sup> have seen a major Europe-wide initiative to expand the teaching of modern foreign languages to primary age pupils. This process of gradual introduction of foreign language teaching at the primary level has involved most European countries and has remarkably increased the number of pupils who are learning at least one foreign language<sup>2</sup>.

In Italy the teaching of a foreign language at the primary level was introduced in 1985, and in 2004 it was extended to all five years of primary school, with English as the most widely taught language.

In order to cater to the new demand for foreign-language (FL) primary school teachers, the Ministry of Education was compelled to organise national in-service training courses for practising primary teachers, who were thus encouraged and enabled to add a foreign language to their repertoire of teaching subjects or skills.

As more and more training courses were organized, it became apparent that it was necessary to define a common standard for the training programmes organized locally by different organizations and/or University Language Centres. Accordingly, Local

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<sup>1</sup> The changes brought about by the past ten years can be observed by comparing the survey carried out by Blondin, Candelier, Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek-German & Taeschner (1998) with the more recent Edelenbos, Johnstone. & Kubanek (2006). An overview of policies and approaches is also provided by Nikolov and Curtain (2000).

<sup>2</sup> According to a report published by the European network Euridice, in 2002 approximately 50% of all pupils were learning at least one foreign language. This figure has been increasing rapidly since the end of the 1990s, when educational reforms took place in a number of countries, particularly in central and eastern Europe, Denmark, Spain, Italy and Iceland, cf.

<http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=049EN>

Education Authorities have implemented various initiatives, including, above all, the development of a language profile for primary school English teachers, validated first at a local level (see Bondi and Poppi, 2006) and later on at a national level (AAVV, 2007) by a panel including representatives of University Language Centres, representatives of professional teacher-training organizations, the authors of the present study and members of the Ministry of Education<sup>3</sup>.

This nation-wide effort aimed at defining a common standard for the various training courses has also involved the definition of a syllabus which teacher-trainers were to use. Accordingly, a provisional syllabus was devised (AAVV, 2007: 67-72 and 74-77), which will have, in due time, to be refined and validated, so as to tailor it to the requirements of a particular kind of learners, i.e. generalist primary teachers.

Primary teachers are usually highly autonomous practitioners, often operating across the full range of the primary curriculum. However, there is a danger of poor self-image for primary teachers of a foreign language because they may view themselves as inferior counterparts to perceived language experts residing in the secondary schools. Secondary teachers are in a position to criticise or even ignore the work done by primary teachers in introducing the foreign language to their pupils. There is therefore the need to bolster confidence as well as competence among primary foreign language teachers.

The present study relies on the assumption that the opinions of primary school generalist teachers who have been following a training course (i.e. the learners' voices) can offer precious and valuable insight for the purpose of refining the design of a

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<sup>3</sup> Relying on locally gathered expertise, attempts have also been made to devise a national certificate, which is to become the official qualification needed by any primary teacher to start teaching English in the local state schools. Cf. for instance, the CEPT (Certificate of English for Primary Teachers), jointly developed by the Language Centres of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the University of Parma, described in Bondi and Poppi (2007).

syllabus to be used during training courses addressed to English-language primary-teachers-to-be, organized locally in Modena and Reggio Emilia.

The paper will first provide some background information on the question of foreign language learning in Italian schools, with particular attention to the organization of training courses for primary school generalist teachers. Later, the main issues that have contributed to defining the theoretical framework of the training courses organized by the Local Education Authorities in Modena and Reggio Emilia will be introduced. Accordingly, the approaches to foreign language learning, teacher training, syllabus design and self-assessment will be discussed. Finally, in Section Four the data provided by a small-scale case study will be introduced. In particular, the results of a series of self-assessment questionnaires completed by a group of generalist primary teachers who had followed a 420-hour training course will be analysed and integrated with the answers obtained from semi-structured interviews with the same teachers. The conclusions will then provide evidence of how learners' voices (i.e. the trainees' opinions) have clearly shown that it is necessary to refine the syllabus which had been provisionally defined as part of the nation-wide effort aimed at defining a common standard for the various training courses all over Italy. In fact, this syllabus, though appropriate for the language level, has a more general target in mind. On the contrary, as the evidence provided by the present study seems to confirm, a syllabus addressed to primary language teachers-to-be should devote particular attention to the abilities actually needed in the context of primary language teaching.

## **2. The background to the study**

### **2.1 Foreign language teaching in Italian primary schools**

In Italy, a survey carried out by IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Students' Achievement) between 1967 and 1973<sup>4</sup> showed that the language competence of Italian students at the end of their course of studies was well below the level of competence of students in other industrialized countries. Therefore, several measures were undertaken, aimed at providing in-service training courses for high school teachers and at introducing FL learning in primary schools. The ILSSE project (Insegnamento Lingue Straniere nella Scuola Elementare)<sup>5</sup> was thus developed, which marked the beginning of initiatives in the area of early foreign language learning in Italy.

Following up that first initiative, a number of steps have been undertaken to pave the way for the introduction of FL teaching throughout the five grades of Italian primary schools. We can mention, for instance, the development of the 'New primary school curricula' in 1985, which can be considered another cornerstone for promoting foreign-language teaching at primary level. In fact, these new curricula officially established the need for early foreign language learning in order to achieve an ever-increasing integration among the member states of the European Union. However, it took five years to complete the re-organization of Italian primary schools. Only in 1990, thanks to the Act of Parliament no. 148/90, the presence of the single class teacher was replaced by the presence of two or more teachers, one of whom was in charge of the teaching of the foreign language. Finally, in 2004, the teaching of the FL was extended to all the five years of primary school, with English as the most widely taught language.

Since there was an insufficient number of trained language teachers available to cater to this new demand at primary level, the Italian government initiated national in-service training courses for practising primary teachers to encourage and enable them to add a

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<sup>4</sup> The results of this survey are available in *Annali della Pubblica Istruzione* (1977).

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools.

foreign language to their repertoire of teaching subjects or skills<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, while courses for generalist primary teachers were organized, many schools also took advantage of trained, specialist, peripatetic language teachers.

## **2.2 The organization of courses addressed to primary school language teachers**

At first there was great variety in the policies, models and types of training on offer. However, as more and more training courses were organized, it became apparent that it was necessary to define a common standard for training programmes that were organized locally by different organizations and/or University Language Centres. Accordingly, on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2005, a document was issued, which singled out the principles on the basis of which of the various training courses had to be organized, focusing most of all on the training process itself, which had to include action-research practices, cooperative learning, workshops, problem solving and self-training procedures. This document also stated that in order to teach a foreign language, primary teachers had to reach the B1 level<sup>7</sup> of the CEFR<sup>8</sup>.

After the end of the first series of training courses the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia was asked by the Local Education Authorities for Modena and Reggio Emilia to act as a consultant regarding the organization of new training courses and the definition of the syllabus that was to be used during these courses.

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<sup>6</sup> For a critical overview of training programmes in Italy, see Lopriore (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Documento a cura del Comitato Tecnico Scientifico I.N.D.I.R.E., which states: “[...] se il docente non è uno specialista, ha una competenza minima di livello B1 in una lingua straniera...” [www.istruzioneer.it/allegato.asp?ID=211218](http://www.istruzioneer.it/allegato.asp?ID=211218).

Information of a more general kind can also be found in Bondi, Ghelfi & Toni (2006).

<sup>8</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference is available at: [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf). It is a document that consists of a series of levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) across five language strands – listening, spoken interaction, spoken production, reading and writing. It has been designed with adult language learners/users, as well as self-assessment in mind. It has the benefit of not being specific to any country or context and offers a continuum for identifying language proficiency within a self-assessment grid.

## 2.3 Principles and definitions

Without revisiting the debate on the usefulness of formal, conscious learning and informal unconscious acquisition (cf. Bialystok, 1982; Davies, Criper and Howatt, 1984; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, 1997, for instance), it is worth paraphrasing Little *et al.*, (1989: 2), that second language learning<sup>9</sup> seems to be fostered by contexts that are rich in opportunities for interaction in and with the foreign language. This interaction can be both social and psychological, as learners must interact with the language internally at various levels of consciousness if they are to reach a satisfactory result. Whether or not such internal interaction takes place appears to depend on how a course and its syllabus and organization relate to the learner's past experience, linguistic or other, and his or her general interests and needs.

It is therefore advisable to refrain from traditional approaches to linguistic syllabus design<sup>10</sup>, which define syllabus, at its simplest level, as a statement of what is to be learnt (cf. Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:80). This definition is, in fact, a rather traditional interpretation, focusing as it does on outcomes rather than process.

On the contrary, the process is quite often the key factor, both when it comes to triggering the learners' interaction in and with the foreign language and when it comes to judging when their performance (comprehension and production) is adequate for the situation in which they are operating or intend to operate.

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<sup>8</sup> By 'second language learning' we refer to the learning of any language at any level, provided that the learning of this second language takes place sometime later than the acquisition of the first language. (Cf. Mitchell and Myles, 2001: 11). This expression will be used as a synonym for 'foreign language learning'.

<sup>10</sup> On syllabus design see, for instance, Gattegno, 1972; Alexander, 1976; Wilkins, 1976; Dubin and Olshtain, 1986; Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Nunan, 1988; White, 1988.

Judging the adequacy of one's performance is a matter of self-assessment (Dickinson, 1996: 31), an activity which is often hindered by the learners' lack of confidence that they are able to do it, in spite of the fact that they do it all the time (though privately and informally).

Until recently, the value of this human process has been largely ignored in pedagogy. Learners were rarely asked to assess their performance, much less have a say in the construction of evaluation instruments. Pedagogically, the term self-assessment was considered oxymoronic. On the contrary, it is important to legitimise self-assessment and to give learners frequent opportunities for self-assessment, as self-assessment accuracy is a condition of learner autonomy. If learners can appraise their own performance accurately enough, they will not have to depend entirely on the opinions of teachers and at the same time they will be able to make teachers aware of their individual learning needs.

In the last decade, with the increased attention to learner-centred curricula, needs analysis, and learner autonomy, the topic of self-assessment has become of particular interest (Blanche, 1988; Oskarsson, 1997). It is now being recognized that learners do have the ability to provide meaningful input into the assessment of their performance, and that this assessment can be valid (LeBlanc and Painchaud, 1985; Oskarsson, 1981, 1984; Coombe, 1992).

The reliability of learners' judgement is subject to variables whose influence is difficult to establish, one of them being the learners' age. On this topic, possible forms of guided self-assessment in adult language learning have been outlined (see, for instance Oskarsson 1978 and 1981) where steps have also been suggested, that might be



taken in order to further develop methods which can be used within schemes for foreign language learning by adults.

## 2.4 Theoretical framework of the local training courses

Teacher training is not an easy task, but it can even get more complicated when a far too perfect and distant picture of a teacher's roles is provided. In the case of the training courses organized by the Local Authorities in Modena and Reggio Emilia, the principles and definitions that have been described in the previous section were referred to. Moreover, it was decided to focus on learner education rather than strict training, following what highlighted by Kohonen *et al.*(2000).

**TABLE 1: Language teaching as learner education** (Kohonen *et al.*, 2000: 21)

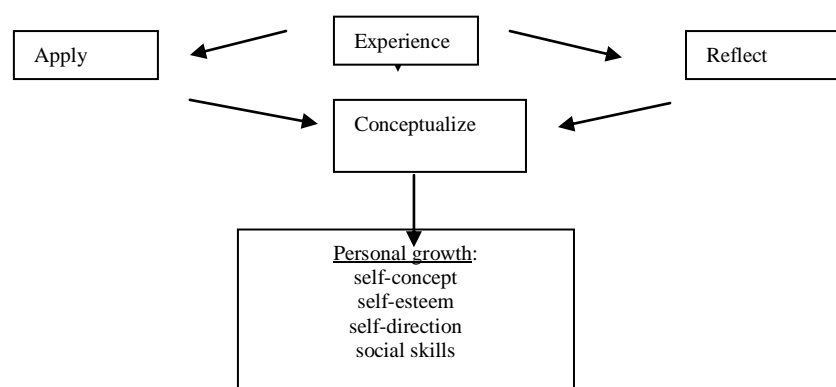
<b>Goal orientation:</b> broad communication and personal growth
<b>Broader syllabus:</b> communicating in new, unpredictable contexts
<b>Personal efficiency:</b> in addition to communication skills, emphasis on risk-taking, self-direction, learning to learn, and social skills.

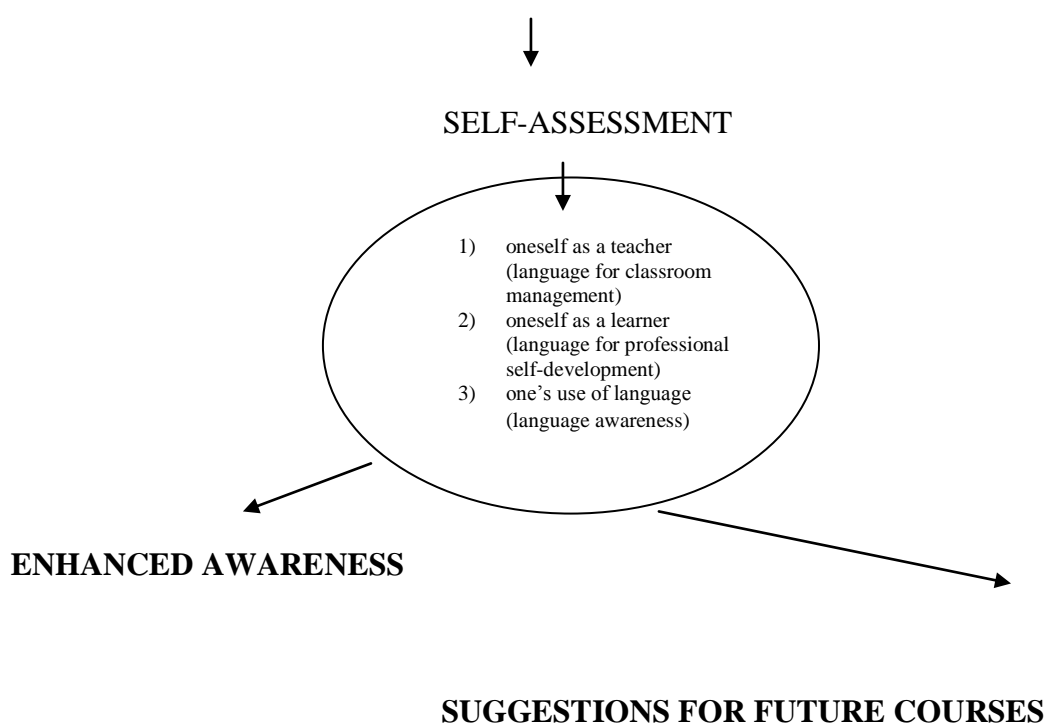
<b>Teacher role:</b> more indirect, individual guidance, negotiation, and contracts for learning tasks
<b>External evaluation, self assessment and reflection</b> of processes

In this context the traditional approach to motivation, where one person's behaviour is seen as motivating another's, is considered, following Ushioda (1997), a contradiction in terms, as self-motivation becomes the only logically coherent locus. Self-motivation is “a capacity that can and should be developed as an integral dimension of learner autonomy” (Ushioda, 1997, p. 38), as it plays a role of pivotal importance in optimising and sustaining one's involvement in learning. In short, training courses need to cater to the learners' motivational agendas and bring the world of their outside interests and experiences into play. In this way the learners will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of their learning which will provide the foundation for autonomous and effective learning (Little, 1991, p. 4).

Banking on the above, it was decided to adapt the theoretical framework described in Table 1 for the purpose of organizing the training courses addressed to primary-school, English-language teachers-to-be and obtaining useful indications for future course-development.

**Table 2: Theoretical Framework**





(adapted from Kohonen, 1992: 22)

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1 The research population

The teachers involved in this study are 30 in-service generalist teachers who had attended a training course (380 hours of language instruction and 40 hours devoted to the development of foreign-language, teaching-learning skills) organized by “Direzione Didattica” (Local Education Authority) in Mirandola.<sup>11</sup> This training course was meant to provide them with the necessary level of language competence to teach English in primary schools.

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<sup>11</sup> Mirandola is a small village, not far from Modena.

The teachers involved were all females<sup>12</sup>. Their age ranged from 32 to 50. Of the group, 60% of the teachers taught Italian language and other subjects in the humanities. Forty percent of the teachers taught scientific subjects. A placement test which had been administered before the beginning of the training course had shown that half of the teachers were beginners, 30% had already reached level A1 and 20% had reached level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

### 3.2 Data collection

At the end of the training course the teachers were asked to self-assess their ability to perform the different activities as defined by descriptors contained in a series of questionnaires, referring to a 1-5 rating scale ranging from ‘not able to’, to ‘fully competent’ (see Appendix 1 for the complete list of the descriptors)<sup>13</sup>.

The questionnaires were taken from the online grids provided on the PLEASE website (Primary Language teacher Education: Autonomy and Self-Evaluation), jointly developed by the Universities of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy, and Stirling, Scotland, as part of a Socrates Lingua Action ‘A’ project entitled ‘Autonomy in Primary Language Teacher Education’<sup>14</sup>.

The PLEASE website was devised to offer primary language teachers the chance to assess their competence by going through three different checklists, each containing a series of statements describing the required language behaviours for primary language teaching, in the contexts of listening, spoken interaction, spoken production, reading and

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<sup>12</sup> This is in line with the present state of primary teaching in Italy, where the number of male teachers is rather low.

<sup>13</sup> For the purpose of the present study, however, only 77 out of the available 98 descriptors have been taken into account. In fact, the 21 descriptors that are meant to assess the respondents’ awareness as FL teachers have not been referred to, since none of the generalist teachers involved had ever taught English before attending the training course.

<sup>14</sup> For further information on the PLEASE website, see Poppi, Low and Bondi (2003); Poppi, Low and Bondi (2005).

writing. These statements had been obtained by adapting the B1 and B2 level descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference to those areas that had been singled out as particularly meaningful for English-language, primary-school teachers (cf. Bondi, 1999: 57), namely language for classroom management (the language needed to manage classroom activities and interaction), language for effective professional self-development, and language awareness (the teachers' awareness of the language and their analytic skills in order to improve both their teaching and their own language learning).

The results of the generalist teachers' self-assessment (which can be found in Appendix 2) were then integrated with the feedback provided by a series of interviews with the same teachers. The interviews were informally structured and had a two-fold aim: to make the teachers express their comments on the course and its organization, and to have them single out those skills which, in their opinion, needed further improvement. The following questions were asked:

- 1) Was the amount of time devoted to the various skills adequate?
- 2) Did the organization of the course meet your requirements?
- 3) Would you have liked to focus on certain skills more than on others? Which ones?
- 4) Were the explanations provided by the teacher-trainers clear and detailed?
- 5) Were the teacher-trainers able to explain the course objectives?
- 6) Did the teacher-trainers clearly explain the differences between the different language certificates: i.e. PET vs. CEPT<sup>15</sup>?
- 7) Which were, in your opinion, the advantages/disadvantages of on-line autonomous training<sup>16</sup>?

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<sup>15</sup> The Preliminary English Test (PET) is one of the Cambridge ESOL certificates. The Certificate of English for Primary Teachers (CEPT) has been jointly developed by the Language Centres of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the University of Parma.

## **4.Data analysis**

### **4.1 Methodology**

After having had the generalist teachers go through the questionnaires, only some of the 77 available descriptors have been taken into account. In particular, it was decided to single out those descriptors for which the majority of the teachers had rated their competence as being 1 or 2 (i.e., below the average standard of competence, signalled by number 3).

Accordingly, for each of the five skills, a list was compiled, which included only those abilities which were not competently mastered by the majority of the generalist teachers.

Then, by going through the transcripts of the trainees' interviews, it was possible to refine the data collected and establish which skills had to receive particular attention on occasion of future training courses. These skills were selected on the grounds that they were the ones that most needed further practice, and on the understanding that, since they had attracted the trainees' attention, they might contribute to the development of the internal interaction between the learners and the foreign language, which is at the basis of successful language learning.

#### **4.2.a Listening**

Looking at the data of the teachers' self-evaluation in the area of listening, we can see that in the domain of language use for classroom management most teachers seem to consider themselves capable of mastery, with varying degrees of competence,

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<sup>16</sup> Twenty out of the forty hours devoted to the development of foreign-language, teaching-learning skills were to be administered via on-line resources.

However, of the various skills in the context of professional self-development, more than half the teachers consider themselves not able to:

- 1) understand both the main points and specific details of a short talk (e.g., an in-service presentation) in standard spoken language, delivered at natural speed;
- 2) understand fairly complex arguments (e.g., in lectures or media programmes) on a familiar topic or when the context is well known;
- 3) use a variety of strategies such as listening for main points and relying on contextual clues for comprehension;
- 4) understand most of the information of relevant, authentic materials in standard, spoken language, delivered at natural speed.

#### **4.2.b Spoken interaction**

In the context of classroom language, there is only one ability which is not fully developed by the majority of the teachers:

- 1) act as a mediator for students when they encounter native speaker language, e.g., by a visitor to the classroom, or a videoconferencing link.

In the area of professional self-development, most of the trainees do not consider themselves able to:

- 1) ask for clarification or information on occasion of seminars or language workshops;
- 2) comment on the ideas, opinions, reactions and contributions of others showing awareness of their feelings (e.g., during seminars or language workshops).

### **4.2.c Spoken production**

Looking at the data on teachers' self-evaluation in the area of spoken production, we can see that in the domain of language use for classroom management, most teachers seem to consider themselves capable of mastery of the various skills, with varying degrees of competence. Nonetheless, in the context of professional self-development, more than half the teachers consider themselves unable to:

- 1) go beyond simple reproduction and generate new language in familiar and some unfamiliar contexts;
- 2) talk in some detail about a range of professional experiences and opinions and explain point of view;
- 3) make a short formal presentation/report to colleagues with the support of notes or of an outline (e.g., on occasion of seminars or language workshops).

### **4.2.d Writing**

In the context of classroom language, there is only one ability which is not fully developed by the majority of the teachers:

- 1) write fairly long and easily comprehensible stories for children.

In the area of professional self-development, the trainees do not consider themselves able to:

- 1) make notes in the foreign language in lectures, seminars or from written sources, (e.g., for revision purposes).

## **5. Discussing the results**

### **5.1 The importance of including the learners' voices**



The answers provided by trainees on occasion of the interviews served the purpose of complementing the results of the self-assessment questionnaires. In particular, for concerns related to the organization of the courses, the trainees remarked that since the lessons (380 hours) had taken place over a period of 18 months, they lacked the time to actually master the new issues that had been introduced. Moreover, they unanimously agreed that the teacher-trainers had been able to guide them and pinpoint their weaknesses and strengths and that the explanations had always been clear and detailed.

As for the objectives of the course, a sustained number of the trainees reported that even though they had been told from the start that the course was aimed at providing them with the necessary qualifications to teach English in primary schools, they still would have liked to get the PET certificate, which is a B1 level Cambridge ESOL certificate, rather than the CEPT certificate. These remarks clearly highlight the fact that it will be necessary, on the occasion of future training courses, to sensitise generalist teachers towards the effective needs of primary school foreign language teaching. In fact, in order to teach a foreign language in primary schools, a teacher should master, in addition to B1 level language competences, other specific skills, which are connected with language for classroom management, language for professional self-development and language awareness, alongside pedagogic and methodological skills. The PET certificate, though appropriate for the level, covers a wider range of skills than those strictly needed by primary language teachers and has a different, more general target in mind, while overlooking issues which are especially relevant to primary teachers. It is therefore necessary to refer to a different certificate that can assess teachers' competences in those areas and skills that are most important for the purposes of primary school teaching.

The 40 hours devoted to the development of foreign-language, teaching-learning skills included 20 hours of frontal lessons and 20 hours of autonomous learning via on-line resources. First of all, the trainees remarked that they would have liked to be able to devote more hours to issues connected with methodological training. Moreover, only few of them considered on-line training completely satisfactory, thanks to the possibility of working at one's own pace according to one's individual schedule, and of accessing a multiplicity of available links. However, the majority of the trainees claimed that on-line training had made them feel alone, without anyone who could guide, advise and spur them on. In other words, they greatly missed the interaction with the teacher-trainer and/or with their fellow learners.

## **5.2 The importance of language competence**

An initial survey of the answers provided by the generalist teachers clearly shows that most of the abilities they considered not fully mastered would probably require a higher level of competence than the one which is needed in order to qualify for primary FL teaching (namely, level B1 of the CEFR). This confirms that in-service training is absolutely needed at the end of the initial training courses as well. In addition, the teachers seemed to be more at ease with the language needed for classroom management than with the language needed for professional self-development.

Looking at the answers provided by the teachers in the area of 'language use for classroom management' it became immediately apparent that the vast majority of the teachers seemed to be more confident with the reading and writing skills rather than with those abilities which refer to the area of audio-oral skills. This finding is confirmed by the results provided by the 'language use for professional self-development' section,

which seems to reinforce the idea that the teachers feel more confident when they have some time for reflection (in writing, or even when listening to themselves on a tape).

This sense of inadequacy on the part of the teachers, which is noticeable in spoken production and spoken interaction in particular, was also explicitly mentioned by all the teachers in the short interviews that were aimed at obtaining their overall comments on course contents and organization.

### **5.3 The trainees' perception of their needs**

During the interviews that were part of the present study, the teachers complained that during the course there had not been time enough to focus on the various skills. Even though the five skills had all been taken into account, listening and speaking activities would have required more time in order to let the trainees actually practice what they had been learning. In fact, most teachers remarked that while a person can work on his or her reading and writing skills at home, at his or her convenience, looking words up in a dictionary and consulting grammar books, a tutor and/or a peer is needed for the purpose of practising listening and speaking skills.

Another remark concerned the amount of time devoted to methodological training. In fact, the majority of the teachers claimed that 100 hours should be required rather than only 40 hours. This extra time, the teachers suggested, could be used for experimenting with different teaching-learning approaches and especially for practising lesson-planning activities and other tasks connected with the actual management of everyday classroom activities.

By integrating these comments with the results provided in the self-assessment checklists, it one may postulate that in a syllabus addressed to primary teachers, the role/importance of spoken skills should outweigh the role of the written ones.

In other words, on the basis of the data that have thus far been collected and analysed, one might suggest that teachers are most concerned with the need to interact with their learners inside the classroom and/or with fellow teachers on occasion of seminars, workshops, presentations, etc., thus relying as much as possible on the ‘technical’ abilities typical of their profession.

#### **5.4 Implications for syllabus design**

Any syllabus can be refined in several different ways. The present study has taken into account one of many possible syllabi. Therefore, in accordance with the limited evidence provided by the results of the present study, the following suggestions for the refinement of syllabi for future training courses addressed to English-language teachers-to-be can be advanced:

- more time should be devoted to practising those structures and functions that are called to the fore whenever audio/oral skills are to be deployed (such as, for instance, questions, use of interrogatives, interrogative forms of all verbs and modals listed in the syllabus);
- activities strictly connected with classroom management and professional self-development should be focused on (e.g., lesson planning, story telling, taking part in in-service presentations, asking for or providing clarifications and information), paying attention to the language forms and functions needed to carry them out;

- greater emphasis should be placed on helping trainees practise role-playing activities simulating class interactions, so as to make them master the relevant lexis;
- interactions between peers and/or trainees and their tutor should be favoured; and
- rather than focusing on a general kind of lexis, the technical vocabulary connected with the FL teaching profession should be focused on.

## **6. Conclusions**

Syllabus planning entails a series of decisions that can be compared to the fitting into place of the different parts of a puzzle, in the sense that quite often, the initial decisions about the contents of the course may be modified on the basis of the learners' feedback.

Once the general framework of the language syllabus has been sketched out, it will obviously be necessary to better refine the contents to be delivered, making sure that those issues and activities that are perceived by practising teachers as the most relevant and meaningful are included.

In the case of this particular study, after considering both the local and the professional cultures of the learners, it was decided to adapt rather than adopt existing tools, in order to negotiate the objectives of the teacher training programme, after having listened to the very voice of the actors involved.

This paper has focused on the results of a series of self-assessment activities that have been integrated with the information provided by semi-structured interviews. The data obtained have highlighted the presence of generalisable trends in the teachers' perceptions of the most important skills connected with their profession, which can be

referred to by teacher educators and syllabus designers in order to refine the syllabus design of further courses addressed to FL primary teachers-to-be.

As previously remarked, the number of teachers who have thus far reviewed the self-assessment checklists is quite small. However, in the near future, as more teachers self-assess their competence in different areas, more meaningful data will be made available.

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## APPENDIX 1

### SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRES

<b>CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT</b>
1. I can follow clearly articulated speech directed at me on familiar matters as encountered in school activities.
2. I can understand recorded materials (e.g., children's stories, fairy-tales, nursery rhymes) about familiar topics when the delivery is slow and clear.
3. I can understand relevant authentic materials such as cartoons and songs.
4. I can model effective communication to my students by listening carefully and acknowledging their contributions verbally and non-verbally.
5. I can elicit and answer my students' questions appropriately and confidently.
6. I can use intonation, gestures, etc. to convey meaning to maximum effect and to engage my students.
7. I can ask questions in a simple way and recast them as necessary to make the language more accessible to my students.
8. I can seek and hold my students' attention, stimulate their interest and encourage them to participate verbally and non-verbally.
9. I can comment on the ideas and contributions of my students and show awareness of their feelings.
10. I can enter into conversation unprepared or unscripted, and interact spontaneously, confidently, and fluently with my students.
11. I can act as a mediator for my students when they encounter native speaker

language, e.g., by a visitor to the classroom, or a videoconferencing link.
12. I can connect phrases in a simple way to describe experiences and events.
13. I can give instructions, organise and manage classroom activities clearly and confidently.
14. I can use fillers, for example <i>well, ...er</i> , to give time for me to think through what I want to say next.
15. I can go beyond the reproduction of fixed phrases and generate new language or transfer language I have learned in a different context to the classroom context.
16. I can use affective language, e.g., to praise, encourage, keep the students on task.
17. I can narrate a simple story with the support of images such as picture stories, comics and cue cards or on the basis of an agreed script.
18. I can relate the plot of children's stories, films or cartoons and I can describe my reactions.
19. I can paraphrase short written passages orally in a simple way, using the original text wording and sequence.
20. When reading aloud to my students I can demonstrate accurately the link between the printed word and pronunciation and meaning.
21. I can understand teaching materials and clearly identify sequences and procedural descriptions.
22. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in reading materials for children.

23. I can discriminate between main points and less important details of a text written for children.

24. I can read aloud stories, poems, and other kinds of texts suited to primary language teaching.

25. I can understand clearly written instructions in teachers' books, concerning, for instance, the organisation of pupils' work and the performance of language tasks/activities.

26. I can understand clearly written instructions for a piece of equipment (e.g., how to operate a CD player, a videotape recorder).

27. I can adapt my style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes.

28. I can use appropriate reference sources (books, websites and the like) in a selective way.

29. I can understand stories and other authentic materials suited for the age range of my students, including imaginative texts and materials related to other areas of the curriculum.

30. I can identify the stances or viewpoints adopted by writers in stories/written materials suited for my students.

31. I can understand in detail instructions in English to operate school equipment (e.g., language laboratory, computers) successfully and effectively.

32. I can read aloud fluently and accurately different kinds of texts suited to primary language teaching,

33. I can produce simple resources for the classroom: captions, cue cards, bubbles

for stories, matching activities (picture-word).
34. I can write simple adaptations of authentic materials making use of dictionaries and other reference materials.
35. I can write simple messages to organise, for instance, an exchange for my students.
36. I can produce differentiated resources for the classroom.
37. I can write fairly long and easily comprehensible stories for children.
38. I can write adaptations of authentic materials, tuning them to the varying students' levels of competence.

#### **LANGUAGE FOR PROFESSIONAL SELF-DEVELOPMENT**

39. I can follow speech directed at me on familiar matters as encountered in professional development (e.g., an in-service presentation), provided the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
40. I can understand both the main points and specific details of a short talk (e.g., an in-service presentation) in standard spoken language, delivered at natural speed.
41. I can understand simple technical information and instructions in the foreign language (e.g., verbal instructions for equipment operation, watching a video, watching a demonstration, etc.).
42. I can understand fairly complex arguments (e.g., in lectures or media programmes) on a familiar topic or when the context is well known.
43. I can use a variety of strategies such as listening for main points and relying on

contextual clues for comprehension.
44. I can understand most of the information of relevant authentic materials in standard spoken language, delivered at natural speed.
45. I can understand authentic materials (e.g., children's stories, songs, rhymes) when the delivery is slow and clear.
46. I can use both verbal and non-verbal behaviour to acknowledge other people's contributions to conversations on familiar topics.
47. I can ask for clarification or information on occasion of seminars or language workshops.
48. I can answer questions on personal experience and express personal opinion in discussions on familiar topics.
49. I can take an active part in discussions asking and answering questions and expressing my point of view.
50. I can comment on the ideas, opinions, reactions and contributions of others showing awareness of their feelings (e.g., during seminars or language workshops).
51. I can use fillers, for example well, ... er, to give time for thought and to keep my turn in the conversation.
52. I can connect sentences in a simple way to describe experiences and events related to my professional life.
53. I can go beyond simple reproduction and generate new language in familiar and some unfamiliar contexts.

54. I can talk in some detail about a range of professional experiences and opinions and explain my point of view.

55. I can make a short formal presentation/report to colleagues with the support of notes or of an outline (e.g., on occasion of seminars or language workshops).

56. I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency, everyday or job-related language.

57. I can understand the main points of texts written specifically for my professional area (e.g., textbook reviews and Primary Language Teaching written resources).

58. I can understand the main points of written texts concerning my professional area (e.g., articles in journals of pedagogy and language teaching and ELT publications).

59. I can guess the meaning of unknown words from the context and infer the meaning of expressions if the topic is familiar.

60. I can scan short texts (e.g., a conference application form or brochure) find relevant facts and information and fulfil a specific task like applying to take part.

61. I can understand clearly written instructions to perform a task (e.g., to operate equipment, to use self-evaluation tools).

62. I can recognize the writer's attitude or viewpoint in articles or reports concerned with my professional area.

63. I can make notes in the foreign language in lectures, seminars or from written



sources, (e.g., for revision purposes).

64. I can write simple texts or messages on topics that are familiar to me or which interest me personally.

65. I can reply to advertisements and ask for more complete or more specific information about products (for example, a language course or a training course).

66. I can convey -- via fax, e-mail -- short simple factual information to friends or colleagues asking and giving information on professional matters (e.g., exchanging information about interesting web-sites and newsgroups).

67. I can write letters to organise , for instance, an exchange for my students.

68. I can write a letter/report to a professional body or journal, passing on information or giving reasons in support or against a particular point of view.

### **LANGUAGE AWARENESS**

69. I can identify foreign language forms and functions suitable for my teaching situation and/or use relevant literature to check and support my choices.

70. I can select materials that are appropriate to the age range and cognitive development of my students.

71. I can select course-books for the teaching and learning of the foreign language on the basis of their strong and weak points.

72. I can select and adapt materials creating activities suitable to the level of linguistic competence of my students.

73. I can recognise the errors my learners make when speaking/writing in the FL.

74. I can identify or speculate about the underlying causes for the most common learners' errors.

75. I can recast or paraphrase difficult language and make it accessible to my students' level.

76. I can identify difficult grammar points for my students and provide a simple explanation.

77. I can understand my learners' questions about the foreign language and how it works and provide them with appropriate answers.

78. I can name language features and provide examples and explanations accessible to my learners' language background.

79. I can help my students identify recurring linguistic mechanisms (e.g., how to ask a question) and guide them through language practice to language production.

80. I can provide a rationale for my choice of different patterns of classroom activities (e.g., use of pairs, group work, etc.).

81. I can describe and explain language used for classroom interaction.

82. I can relate my choice to use the FL for classroom management to the needs of my students and the learning situation.

83. I can distinguish between the role of management and content language in classroom interaction.

84. I can develop strategies to balance the teaching of both management and content language in classroom interaction.

85. I can use my knowledge of the FL grammar, lexis and functions to facilitate my students' learning in an appropriate way.

86. I can use the learning of L2 to increase students' knowledge of L1 and stimulate their interest in how language works.

87. I can compare and contrast L1 and L2 items and guide students' reflection on similarities and differences between L1 and L2.

88. I can help my students transfer the knowledge and understanding they already have about how language works to the FL learning situation.

89. I can provide a rationale for the foreign language programme of study across the primary age range, describing its purpose, objectives, scope and structure (e.g., to parents, colleagues etc.).

90. I can check my knowledge about language using recommended reference books such as dictionaries and grammars.

91. I can check my hypotheses about language choosing relevant reference books (dictionaries and grammar books) in an independent way.

92. I can recognise the errors I make when I have some time for reflection, e.g. in writing or when listening to myself on a tape.

93. I can monitor my language production and identify my own errors, frequently offering forms of immediate self-correction.

94. I can use my knowledge of written-word and sound relationships to help me recognise familiar language and guess the meaning of unfamiliar language.

95. I can look for grammatical clues, draw inferences and predict on the basis of

linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the content and knowledge of the world.
96. I can undertake activities for peer or self-evaluation, identifying my own level in relation to given standard levels (i.e., the completing of tasks such as this).
97. I can analyse the results of my self-evaluation and plan activities for self-development on the basis of specific lacks, needs, wants identified, provided some guidance or help is available.
98. I can undertake activities for self-development, with peers or with some guidance.

## Appendix 2

### Respondent's answers

#### LISTENING – CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

	1	2	3	4	5
I can follow clearly articulated speech directed at me on familiar matters as encountered in school activities.	4	4	11	6	5
I can understand recorded materials (e.g., children's stories, fairy-tales, nursery rhymes) about familiar topics when the delivery is slow and clear.	2	2	13	13	
I can understand relevant authentic materials such as cartoons and songs.	3	4	15	6	2

#### LISTENING – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

:	1	2	3	4	5
I can follow speech directed at me on familiar matters as encountered in professional development (e.g., an in-service presentation), provided the delivery is relatively slow and clear.		6	7	16	1
I can understand both the main points and specific details of a short talk (e.g., an in-service presentation) in standard spoken language, delivered at natural speed.	3	15	6	6	
I can understand simple technical information and instructions in the foreign language (e.g., verbal instructions for equipment operation, watching a video, watching a demonstration, etc.).	6	1	15	6	2
I can understand fairly complex arguments (e.g., in lectures or media programmes) on a familiar topic or when the context is well known.	8	12	4	3	3
I can use a variety of strategies such as listening for main points and relying on contextual clues for comprehension.	6	10	14		
I can understand most of the information of relevant authentic materials in standard spoken language, delivered at natural speed.	10	10	5	2	3
I can understand authentic materials (e.g., children's stories, songs, rhymes) when the delivery is slow and clear.	1	5	17	3	4

## **SPOKEN INTERACTION – CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

	1	2	3	4	5
I can model effective communication to my students by listening carefully and acknowledging their contributions verbally and non-verbally.	8	2	4	12	4
I can elicit and answer my students' questions appropriately and confidently.	6	4	8	8	4
I can use intonation, gestures, etc. to convey meaning to maximum effect and to engage my students.	6	4	8	8	4
I can ask questions in a simple way and recast them as necessary to make the language more accessible to my students.	4	4	15	4	3
I can seek and hold my students' attention, stimulate their interest and encourage them to participate verbally and non-verbally.	4		10	12	4
I can comment on the ideas and contributions of my students and show awareness of their feelings.	4	4	5	13	4
I can enter into conversation unprepared or unscripted, and interact spontaneously, confidently, and fluently with my students.	6	4	10	6	4
I can act as a mediator for my students when they encounter native speaker language, e.g., by a visitor to the classroom, or a videoconferencing link.	6	12	6	4	2

## SPOKEN INTERACTION – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

	1	2	3	4	5
I can use both verbal and non-verbal behaviour to acknowledges other people's contributions to conversations on familiar topics.	6	3	8	8	5
I can ask for clarification or information on occasion of seminars or language workshops.	6	16	3	2	3
I can answer questions on personal experience and express personal opinion in discussions on familiar topics.	1	6	6	13	4
I can take an active part in discussions asking and answering questions and expressing my point of view.	4	6	12	4	4
I can comment on the ideas, opinions, reactions and contributions of others showing awareness of their feelings (e.g. during seminars or language workshops).	6	10	10	4	
I can use fillers, for example well, ... er, to give time for thought and to keep my turn in the conversation.	6	4	14	6	

### **SPOKEN PRODUCTION – CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

	1	2	3	4	5
I can connect phrases in a simple way to describe experiences and events.	6	6	8	8	2
I can give instructions, organise and manage classroom activities clearly and confidently.	4	4	8	8	6

I can use fillers, for example <i>well, ...er</i> , to give time for me to think through what I want to say next.	4	2	8	12	4
I can go beyond the reproduction of fixed phrases and generate new language or transfer language I have learned in a different context to the classroom context.	6		10	8	6
I can use affective language, e.g., to praise, encourage, keep the students on task.	6		10	8	6
I can narrate a simple story with the support of images such as picture stories, comics and cue cards or on the basis of an agreed script.	4	3	14	9	
I can relate the plot of children's stories, films or cartoons and I can describe my reactions.	4	6	9	9	2
I can paraphrase short written passages orally in a simple way, using the original text wording and sequence.	4	3	4	19	
When reading aloud to my students I can demonstrate accurately the link between the printed word and pronunciation and meaning.	5	5	7	13	

## SPOKEN PRODUCTION – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



	1	2	3	4	5
I can connect sentences in a simple way to describe experiences and events related to my professional life.	3	4	10	10	3
I can go beyond simple reproduction and generate new language in familiar and some unfamiliar contexts.	9	9	6	4	2
I can talk in some detail about a range of professional experiences and opinions and explain my point of view.	9	8	12	1	
I can make a short formal presentation/report to colleagues with the support of notes or of an outline (e.g., on occasion of seminars or language workshops).	8	10	6	4	2

## READING – CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

:	1	2	3	4	5
I can understand teaching materials and clearly identify sequences and procedural descriptions.	6		12	9	3
I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in reading materials for children.	5	1	6	16	2
I can discriminate between main points and less important details of a text written for children.	5	3	6	13	3
I can read aloud stories, poems, and other kinds of texts suited to primary language teaching.	3	4	6	15	2
I can understand clearly written instructions in teachers' books, concerning, for instance, the organisation of pupils' work and the performance of language tasks/activities.	4	2	12	9	3

I can understand clearly written instructions for a piece of equipment (e.g., how to operate a CD player, a videotape recorder).	4	3	10	10	3
I can adapt my style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes.	6	3	7	12	2
I can use appropriate reference sources (books, websites and the like) in a selective way.	6	5	4	10	5
I can understand stories and other authentic materials suited for the age range of my students, including imaginative texts and materials related to other areas of the curriculum.	4	2	8	10	6
I can identify the stances or viewpoints adopted by writers in stories/written materials suited for my students.	5	6	6	10	3
I can understand in detail instructions in English to operate school equipment (e.g., language laboratory, computers) successfully and effectively.	4	6	16	4	
I can read aloud fluently and accurately different kinds of texts suited to primary language teaching,	6	5	8	10	1

## READING– PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

	1	2	3	4	5
I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency, everyday or job-related language.	3	3	8	15	1
I can understand the main points of texts written specifically	4	6	4	15	1

for my professional area (e.g., textbook reviews and Primary Language Teaching written resources).					
I can understand the main points of written texts concerning my professional area (e.g., articles in journals of pedagogy and language teaching and ELT publications).	4	2	6	15	3
I can guess the meaning of unknown words from the context and infer the meaning of expressions if the topic is familiar.	4	8	5	13	
I can scan short texts (e.g., a conference application form or brochure), find relevant facts and information and fulfil a specific task like applying to take part.	5	5	6	10	4
I can understand clearly written instructions to perform a task (e.g., to operate equipment, to use self-evaluation tools).	2	3	17	3	5
I can recognize the writer's attitude or viewpoint in articles or reports concerned with my professional area.	4	3	19	3	1

## WRITING– CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

	1	2	3	4	5
I can produce simple resources for the classroom: captions, cue cards, bubbles for stories, matching activities (picture-word).	4	3	8	10	5
I can write simple adaptations of authentic materials making use of dictionaries and other reference materials.	4	1	10	12	3

I can write simple messages to organise, for instance, an exchange for my students.	6	4	8	12	
I can produce differentiated resources for the classroom.	5	1	14	6	4
I can write fairly long and easily comprehensible stories for children.	7	9	4	7	3
I can write adaptations of authentic materials, tuning them to the varying students' levels of competence.	4	4	14	6	2

## WRITING – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

	1	2	3	4	5
I can make notes in the foreign language in lectures, seminars or from written sources, (e.g., for revision purposes).	10	12	5	3	
I can write simple texts or messages on topics that are familiar to me or which interest me personally.	3	3	12	12	
I can reply to advertisements and ask for more complete or more specific information about products (for example, a language course or a training course).	6	3	14	3	4
I can convey -- via fax, e-mail -- short simple factual information to friends or colleagues asking and giving information on professional matters (e.g., exchanging information about interesting web-sites and newsgroups).	3	8	13	3	3
I can write letters to organise, for instance, an exchange for my students.	2	8	10	6	4
I can write a letter/report to a professional body or journal,	5	7	16	2	

passing on information or giving reasons in support or against a particular point of view.					
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## MYSELF AS LEARNER

	1	2	3	4	5
I can check my knowledge about language using recommended reference books such as dictionaries and grammars.	5	2	8	12	3
I can check my hypotheses about language choosing relevant reference books (dictionaries and grammar books) in an independent way.	5	4	7	14	
I can recognise the errors I make when I have some time for reflection, e.g. in writing or when listening to myself on a tape.	4	2	10	12	2
I can monitor my language production and identify my own errors, frequently offering forms of immediate self-correction.	3	5	16	6	
I can use my knowledge of written-word and sound relationships to help me recognise familiar language and guess the meaning of unfamiliar language.	4	6	12	7	1
I can look for grammatical clues, draw inferences and predict on the basis of linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the content and knowledge of the world.	2	6	12	8	2

I can undertake activities for peer or self-evaluation, identifying my own level in relation to given standard levels (i.e., the completing of tasks such as this).	6		8	12	4
I can analyse the results of my self-evaluation and plan activities for self-development on the basis of specific lacks, needs, wants identified, provided some guidance or help is available.	3	7	8	12	
I can undertake activities for self-development, with peers or with some guidance.	3	5	9	12	1